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BODY:

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 1959 CUBAN REVOLUTION IS IN EDUCATION WHERE PROGRESS HAS BEEN SO RAPID THAT CUBA GIVES FREE EDUCATION TO THOUSANDS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS AND EXPORTS ITS TALENT.

"BY BEING INTERNATIONALISTS WE ARE REPAYING OUR DEBT TO HUMANITY," PRESIDENT FIDEL CASTRO SAID.

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ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL FIGURES ABOUT 20,000 CUBAN TEACHERS ARE WORKING IN 20 COUNTRIES INCLUDING MOZAMBIQUE, ANGOLA, ETHIOPIA, TANZANIA, NICARAGUA, GUYANA AND GRENADA.

AN ESTIMATED 14,000 FOREIGN STUDENTS, MOSTLY AFRICANS, RECEIVE FREE EDUCATION AT CUBAN SCHOOLS.

"WE HAVE GEARED OUR EDUCATION PROGRAMME NOT ONLY IN THE CONTEXT OF CUBA'S NEEDS BUT ALSO THE NEEDS OF THE THIRD WORLD," DR MAX FIGUEROA ARAUJO, HEAD OF THE CULTURAL INSTITUTE OF PEDAGOGICAL STUDIES, TOLD REUTERS.

DR FIGUEROA SAID THE BUDGET FOR EDUCATION HAD INCREASED PROGRESSIVELY SINCE 1959, AND THIS YEAR WAS 1.8 BILLION DOLLARS, ABOUT EIGHT PER CENT OF THE GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT.

"THIS REPRESENTS A STATE INVESTMENT OF ABOUT 180 DOLLARS FOR EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD," HE ADDED.

DR FIGUEROA SAID CUBAN TEACHERS AND TECHNICAL ADVISERS WERE SENT FREE OF CHARGE TO POOR COUNTRIES THAT NEEDED THEM.

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"FOR COUNTRIES THAT CAN AFFORD TO PAY FOR OUR SERVICES, WE CHARGE SOMETHING," HE ADDED, BUT SAID HE KNEW NO DETAILS OF THE PAYMENT SCHEME.

ASKED IF CUBA WOULD BE ABLE TO ABSORB ALL THE SKILLED PEOPLE IT TURNED OUT, DR FIGUEROA SAID THE EDUCATION PROGRAMME WAS BEING TAILORED NOT ONLY TO HELP CUBA BUT THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES IN GENERAL.

IN ANY EVENT HE SAID THAT SINCE EDUCATION WAS STATE CONTROLLED, THE DEMAND FOR PARTICULAR SKILLS COULD BE CAREFULLY BALANCED WITH SUPPLY.

REFERRING TO CHARGES THAT CUBA IN TAILORING ITS EDUCATION PROGRAMME TO THE NEEDS OF POOR COUNTRIES WAS ASPIRING TO LEADERSHIP OF THE THIRD WORLD, DR FIGUEROA SAID "WE ARE TOO SMALL A NATION WITH ENOUGH PROBLEMS OF OUR OWN TO ASPIRE TO H

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CUBA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM IS BASED ON THE PRINCIPLE OF COMBINING STUDY WITH WORK, THEORY WITH PRACTICE, INSTRUCTION WITH PRODUCTION. "IN SHORT, SCHOOL IS LINKED WITH LIFE," DR FIGUEROA SAID.

HE SAID EVERY SCHOOL SET UP COST THE STATE AN INITIAL 1,600,000 DOLLARS PLUS AN ANNUAL OPERATING COST OF 450,000 DOLLARS.

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HOW CAN A RELATIVELY POOR COUNTRY INVEST SO MUCH IN SCHOOLS?

"SINCE EDUCATION IS LINKED TO WORK, THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF THE LABOUR PUT IN BY STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY DURING HARVEST SEASON, IN DUE TIME EQUALS OR EVEN EXCEEDS THE ORIGINAL INVESTMENT," DR FIGUEROA EXPLAINED.

EDUCATION IN CUBA IS FREE AND COMPULSORY UP TO THE 12TH GRADE. HIGHER EDUCATION IS ALSO FREE BUT GRADUATES MUST DEVOTE THREE YEARS OF THEIR LIVES TO PROVIDING SOCIAL SERVICES ANYWHERE THE GOVERNMENT CHOOSES TO SEND THEM.

IT IS FROM WITHIN THE GRADUATE RANKS THAT DOCTORS, TEACHERS, ENGINEERS AND THE LIKE ARE SENT ABROAD BY CUBA.

THE BEST KNOWN OF CUBA'S "BRAIN CENTRES" IS THE ISLE OF YOUTH, 60 MILES (90 KM) OFF THE SOUTHWEST COAST WHICH IS DOTTED WITH ABOUT 50 SCHOOLS CATERING TO SOME 14,000 FOREIGN STUDENTS AND SLIGHTLY MORE CUBANS.

THEY MIX FREELY, STUDYING HALF THE DAY AND WORKING THE OTHER HALF IN CITRUS FIELDS.

DR FIGUEROA SAID THE CURRICULUM OF FOREIGN STUDENTS WAS SIMILAR TO THAT OF THEIR CUBAN COUNTERPARTS.

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"WE LIMIT OUR TEACHING FOR FOREIGNERS TO STRICTLY ACADEMIC SUBJECTS AND CHARGES BY OUR ENEMIES THAT WE TRAIN THEM TO INSTIGATE TROUBLE OR MAKE BOMBS ARE ALL PURE PROPAGANDA," HE ADDED.

DR FIGUEROA SAID HE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHY CUBA WAS CRITICISED FOR HELPING AND TRAINING FOREIGN STUDENTS.

"OTHER DEVELOPED COUNTRIES DO THE SAME AND THEY ARE PRAISED FOR THEIR HUMANITARIAN WORK. WE, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE CONDEMNED AND ACCUSED OF BRAINWASHING FOREIGN STUDENTS AND EXPORTING OUR IDEOLOGY," HE SAID.

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